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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000971

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/CARC, EUR/PPD

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM AM

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON CLAIMS OPPOSITION HAS EQUAL ACCESS TO TV COVERAGE

REF: YEREVAN 481

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Classified By: Ambassador John M. Evans for reasons 1.4(b, d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶11. (C) On July 4, Presidential Spokesperson Victor Soghomonian sent official letters to OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti and Head of the "Ago" monitoring group of the COE Council of Ministers Ambassador Roland Wegener refuting claims that opposition politicians are not provided equal access to airtime on Armenia's TV stations. The letters state that they were sent in response to Mr. Haraszti's and Ambassador Wegener's separate visits to Armenia during which they expressed concern to President Kocharian about freedom of the press issues. Attached to the letters, Mr. Soghomonian included a list of opposition politicians who had received air time on Armenian TV stations during the late spring and early summer. This appears to be an attempt in advance of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections to refute claims that the GOAM pressures Armenian television stations not to feature prominent opposition politicians. End Summary.

¶12. (C) On July 7, we received copies of letters from Presidential Spokesperson Victor Soghomonian addressed to OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Miklos Haraszti and Head of the &Ago8 monitoring group of the COE Council of Ministers Ambassador Roland Wegener. The letters were sent in reference to Mr. Haraszti's and Ambassador Wegener's separate visits to Armenia during which they expressed concern to President Kocharian about freedom of the press issues. Mr. Soghomonian's letter to Mr. Haraszti states that, during a meeting with Mr. Haraszti, President Kocharian had provided a list of politicians who had appeared on four private television stations, but as the issue &remained open8 for Mr. Haraszti, Mr. Soghomonian was attaching an expanded list of more than 80 opposition politicians who appeared on seven television stations between April 1 and June 23, 2006. Referring to this list, in the letter Mr. Soghomonian states, &It is not difficult to note that (the) Armenian opposition has easy and frequent access to TV air time. Much more frequent than the representatives of the government.8 Mr. Soghomonian also stresses that most programs featuring opposition politicians were broadcast live, excluding the possibility of government interference or censorship, and noted that state-owned Public Television was not included in the list because it did not air political

talk shows.

MEDIA AND NGO REPS CLAIM GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF TELEVISION

¶3. (C) Opposition politicians and freedom of speech advocates claim that the GOAM regulates the airtime given to prominent opposition politicians on Armenian television. Boris Navasardian, Head of the Yerevan Press Club, told us that television station directors must receive approval from the government "within the framework developed by the President's Office" prior to airing political programs. According to Navasardian, the frequency with which television stations must report their political programming varies according to how favorably the government views the outlet, with those considered to be less favorable towards the government being required to report as often as every other day. Aram Abrahamian, editor of "Aravot" newspaper, confirmed this practice, stating that television station directors must obtain permission directly from the President's Office in order to air political programs. He said the frequency of reporting ranged from once per week to once per month depending on the station.

¶4. (C) Mr. Soghomonian's statement in his letter to Mr. Haraszti that state-owned Public TV did not air political talk shows demonstrates Public TV's focus on entertainment programs. According to Boris Navasardian of the Yerevan Press Club, "The government claims that public television must please its audience with popular programs, which is why it is focusing more on entertainment and less on political programs." This was used as a justification by Public TV when it attempted to end its broadcasts of parliament sessions. However, a new television ratings system developed by the International Research Exchanges Board (IREX) in partnership with the AGB Nielson Company revealed that the

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&Parliamentary Hour8 program actually received higher ratings than the other programs aired at the same time on the same day (Ref). Bob Evans, Director of IREX's Core Media Support Program, noted that Public TV should not be concerned with the popularity of its programming, as the station is supported with government funds and is supposed to have the goal of informing the citizens of Armenia. According to Evans, the only reason Public TV should be concerned about its ratings is if it is using advertising revenue to supplement the income of its high-level executives.

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COMMENT  
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¶5. (C) Claims that the President's Office is directly controlling access to television air time are difficult to evaluate. Such control would require more personnel than just Presidential Chief of Staff Armen Gevorgyan, the top suspect of Armenia's many conspiracy theorists, although suspicion also attaches to President of the Board of Public Television and Radio Alexan Harutunian, a Kocharian loyalist.

The real culprit is likely a more elusive one: self-censorship. With advertising revenue at an all-time high and the loss of one's broadcast license perceived as a real threat (opposition TV station A1-Plus remains off the air for more than two years), television station managers will take no chances.

¶6. (C) With parliamentary and presidential elections approaching, it appears the GOAM is feeling increased pressure to prove to the international community that the Armenian press is free of government pressure. While slight progress has been made, with opposition politicians now receiving some access to television air time, coalition politicians continue to dominate Armenia's air waves, and state-owned Public TV, the most widely watched station (and

one of the few that has national coverage of the audience), fails even to provide a forum to present opposing views. Armenian media observers believe that the GOAM feels it is safe to permit media access to opposition figures during this non-election period. Looking forward to the elections, Mission's technical assistance to television stations is geared toward helping them become financially independent businesses that can resist external pressures and censorship.

We will also continue to participate in the efforts of the OSCE Media Group as well as other international fora in Armenia to push on the GOAM to actually create an environment in which free media and free speech can flourish. However, the upcoming elections will serve as the true test of government willingness to allow the media to freely cover all parties in the political mix.

EVANS